

# “I Am a Lesbian”: Black Queer Subjectivities in *The Watermelon Woman* and *Pariah*

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Stephanie Andrea Allen

## Abstract

In 2011, cultural critic Nelson George asserted, “*Pariah* is important, not simply as a promising directorial debut, but also as the most visible example of the mini-movement of young black filmmakers telling stories that complicate assumptions about what ‘black film’ can be by embracing thorny issues of identity, alienation and sexuality.” However, filmgoers, myself included, were offended at the *New York Times* comparison of *Pariah* to Lee Daniel’s *Precious* (2008), another “Black” movie, but with such radically different content that one wonders if the reviewers actually watched Dee Rees’s Black lesbian coming-out story. Much like Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman*, another film written, directed, and produced by a Black lesbian, *Pariah* was marketed as a “Black” film, effectively ignoring its queerness. And while both movies received favorable reviews, neither film did very well at the box office, suggesting that Black moviegoers had little interest in Black lesbian film.

Hence, this essay will address the ways in which two Black lesbian filmmakers, Cheryl Dunye and Dee Rees, wrote, produced, and directed films that sought to counter common stereotypes regarding queer Black subjectivities, specifically those of Black lesbians, and how their struggles to produce, market, and distribute these films are indicative of the challenges that Black lesbians in the United States still face due to racism, sexism, and homophobia. To be sure, Black lesbian filmmakers are “contest[ing] the dominant gendered and sexual definitions of racial difference by working on black sexuality” (Hall 1993, 274), in this case, Black queer subjectivities in the form of Black lesbians. Stuart Hall also reminds us that the struggle over cultural hegemony “is never about pure victory or pure domination . . . it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture, it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it” (107). Thus, late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Black lesbian filmmakers were engaged in challenging contemporary discourses that ignore the particularities of race and gender when it comes to representing LGBT experiences in film, thus hoping to exert agency over their representations in popular culture.

I assert that both *Pariah* and *The Watermelon Woman* work to expand the archive of Black lesbian filmic representations by focusing on the ways in which Black lesbian identities are validated, embraced, and complicated by Black women in the United States. At the same time, these films reveal the unique

challenges that Black lesbian filmmakers face from the film industry, as well as from their own communities.

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“Fae’s life means hope, inspiration, and possibility; it means history! It means I am able to say that I am a Black lesbian filmmaker” (Dunye 1996). These lines appear near the end of Cheryl Dunye’s trailblazing mockumentary, where she also stars as a wayward video store worker/filmmaker in search of a Black lesbian past. *The Watermelon Woman* was the first full-length feature film with a Black lesbian protagonist directed by an out Black lesbian.<sup>1</sup> Dunye’s film, while hailed as “stimulating and funny” by the *New York Times* (Holden 1997), bombed at the box office, earning a little less than \$9,000 on opening night<sup>2</sup>. Some fifteen years later, in 2011, Dee Rees would also make Black lesbian film history as the second out Black lesbian filmmaker to release a full-length feature film with a Black lesbian protagonist in her coming-of-age story, *Pariah*. While Rees’s film fared a bit better at the box office, it too failed to reap financial rewards on par with its critical success. While I am not suggesting that box office success equates with a film’s quality or merit, I am suggesting that poor box office showings for films by Black directors or films focused on Black lead characters, regardless of critical acclaim, are often a death knell for more of those films being produced. At the same time, Black filmgoing audiences are often held accountable for a film’s success or lack thereof, which belies the ways in which these films are sold and marketed to theaters and to the public, and the paucity of resources allocated to Black films. These strategies and assumptions often ignore the tensions in Black communities regarding what constitutes hegemonic Blackness and which Black films are supported and which ones are ignored.

Nevertheless, in 2011, cultural critic Nelson George asserted, “*Pariah* is important, not simply as a promising directorial debut, but also as the most visible example of the mini-movement of young black filmmakers telling stories that complicate assumptions about what “black film” can be by embracing thorny issues of identity, alienation and sexuality.” However,

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1. Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz, eds., *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, 116.

2. *The Watermelon Woman* earned \$8,936 during its opening weekend. To date, it’s gross domestic earnings are \$42,735. *The Numbers*, retrieved from <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Watermelon-Woman-The#tab=summary>, accessed September 9, 2021.

filmgoers, myself included, were offended at the *New York Times*' comparison of *Pariah* to Lee Daniel's *Precious* (2008), another "Black" movie, but with such radically different content that one wonders if the reviewers had actually watched Rees's film.<sup>3</sup> *Pariah* was marketed as a "Black" film, effectively ignoring its queerness, while *The Watermelon Woman* was marketed as a crossover film, which might have been what led to its poor box office showing. Based on its earnings, it did not resonate with lesbian filmgoers, nor did it sit well with straight viewers. One is left to ponder, then, if both films were so *good*—indeed, representative of the best that Black lesbian filmmaking had to offer in their respective time periods—why did they do so poorly at the box office?

I contend that a comparative analysis of these films reveals how *Pariah* and *The Watermelon Woman* work to expand the archive of Black lesbian filmic representations by focusing on the ways in which Black lesbian identities are validated, embraced, and complicated by Black women in the United States. At the same time, these films reveal the unique challenges that Black lesbian filmmakers face from the film industry, often leading to box office disappointment. Cheryl Dunye and Dee Rees wrote, produced, and directed films that sought to not only counter common stereotypes regarding Black queer subjectivities, specifically those of Black lesbians, but also to create an archive of Black lesbian histories and realities that affirm and cement our place in the United States. Nevertheless, their struggles to produce, market, and distribute these films are indicative of the challenges that Black lesbians in the United States still face due to racism, sexism, and homophobia. Black lesbians are often stereotyped as unattractive or hypermasculine, as engaged in criminal behavior, or fetishized as masterful in bed. Still, Black lesbian filmmakers are "contest[ing] the dominant gendered and sexual definitions of racial difference by working on black sexuality" (Hall 1997, 274), in this case, Black queer subjectivities in the form of Black lesbians. Stuart Hall (1993) also reminds us that the struggle over cultural hegemony "is never about pure victory or pure domination . . . it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture, it is always about changing the dispositions

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3. See Stephen Holden's review of the film, "A Brooklyn Girl Who's Just not Frilly," [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/28/movies/pariah-with-adepero-oduye-as-a-young-lesbian-review.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/28/movies/pariah-with-adepero-oduye-as-a-young-lesbian-review.html?_r=0). While Holden (2011) admits that *Pariah* and *Precious* have "little in common," he assumes that the audience for both films is "demographically" the same, making the assumption that the movie will only attract Black audiences. Nelson George (2011) makes a similar mistake in his review by suggesting that both films are about "sexual issues," which is an unrealistic comparison of the two films.

and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it" (107). Thus, late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Black lesbian filmmakers are engaged in challenging contemporary discourses that continue to assume that Black and queer films are mutually exclusive.

This essay begins with a brief analysis of Black independent film and its fraught relationship to production and distribution. I then turn to the "golden age of queer cinema," outlining the ways in which it created the cultural milieu in which Dunye found support for her film and at the same time exposing the racial and sexual barriers that kept it from succeeding at the box office. Fifteen years later, Rees benefited from the work of early Black independent filmmakers like Spike Lee, who served as a mentor and executive producer on her film, as well as the golden age of queer cinema, which seemingly paved the way for more Black lesbian representation in film. Lastly, I conduct a close reading of both films, arguing that they work to challenge hegemonic and stereotypical representations of Black lesbians in mainstream *and* queer cinema, all the while revealing the fraught nature of Black queer subjectivity, friendship, community, and belonging. My intervention in media studies, Black lesbian studies, and Black queer studies foregrounds the power of Black lesbian storytelling and filmmaking, even as we continue to expand our notion of Black queer subjectivities.

## Show Us the Money!

Black independent film, as defined by Manthia Diawara (1993), is "any Black-produced film outside the constraints of the major studios. The filmmakers' independence from Hollywood enables them to put on the screen Black lives and concerns that derive from the complexity of Black communities" (7). As such, Black independent film has always had a fraught relationship with production and distribution. Filmmakers Oscar Micheaux,<sup>4</sup> Charles Burnett, Melvin Van Peebles, Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, and Spike Lee<sup>5</sup> all fall into the category of Black independent filmmakers who strove to make films for

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4. Oscar Micheaux is considered the first major African American filmmaker, producing over 44 independent films. For more on Micheaux, see Bowser, Gaines, and Musser 2001 and Green 2000.

5. Burnett, Dash, and Gerima were a part of the L.A. Rebellion of the 1970s and 1980s, a group of UCLA films students who "shared not only a film education but a commitment to making movies that are simultaneously art and weapon, a commitment that can be grasped in terms of loosely defined, anti-Hollywood aesthetics and black-liberation politics" (Keeling et al. 2015, 294).

and about Black people in response to Hollywood's limiting representations of Black life. What they also had in common was difficulty in financing and distributing their films. Micheaux sold property and borrowed money from friends to finance his films, and Lee constantly battled debtors while working on his first major film *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). It took Julie Dash ten years to finish her film, mostly due to an inability to procure financing.

Still, "every independent filmmaker's dream is to make films for Hollywood where she/he will have access to the resources of the studios and the movie theaters" (Diawara 1993, 4). This precarious situation of wanting to work outside of the Hollywood studio system but needing it to distribute and screen films exists for several reasons. Black independent filmmakers want to make films that reveal the complexity of Black lives, as well as to combat the stereotypical representations of Blacks in film that date back to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. However, Hollywood controls the means through which even independent films are produced and distributed, and in most cases "these films aren't recognized as valuable, or their value isn't legible to critics, curators, and distributors" (Keeling et al. 2015, 430). Black independent filmmakers often struggle financially to make their films, but the real barrier is film distribution. While some independent studios partner with a major studio for financing and distribution for access to the "upper tier" of the film market, "This tier is otherwise largely inaccessible to independents except for the occasional cases of small-budget films that unexpectedly become box office successes" (Scott 2004, 35). This creates a conundrum for Black independent filmmakers who might benefit from a partnership with a major studio to produce a film, or from the exposure of a successful screening at a film festival that might lead to studio financing.

Independent filmmakers often use film festivals as an entrée into Hollywood distribution systems.<sup>6</sup> "Film festivals are a major gateway through which independent films have to pass, but since there are so few people of color—or people who actually value these films—on the selection and curating committees, that these festivals block many of these films from reaching audiences" (Keeling et al. 2015, 430). Even a system designed for filmmakers who are eschewing the major Hollywood studios still mostly overlooks Black independent films. Black independent filmmakers, regardless of their studio affiliations, find it difficult to marry their ideals with films that amplify Black experiences and their need for major studio funding. While some filmmakers are successful, the financial and artistic challenges of being a Black independent filmmaker are ongoing.

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6. For example, the Sundance, Tribeca, and Los Angeles film festivals.

## The Golden Age of Black Queer Cinema

Although Black lesbian filmmaker Yvonne Welbon refers to 1991–1996 as the “golden age” of a black queer cinema” (Tillet 2012), most of those films were documentaries and rarely made it to the big screen. Notable films by Black gay and lesbian filmmakers include Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* (1991), Michelle Parkerson and Ada Day Griffin’s *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1994), and Welbon’s own film, *Living with Pride: Ruth C. Ellis at 100* (1999). Probably the most well-known film of this time featuring Black gay or lesbian themes is Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* (1991). Dozens of short films focusing on Black lesbian lives and experiences were directed during this time period, but very few achieved the critical or cultural prominence as that of Riggs’s film. In fact, hardly any Black lesbian films created during this period received any attention at all from audiences or critics. Most of the films were short, ranging from five to thirty minutes, and only one feature-length fictional film was able to procure a distribution deal that allowed it to be shown in major theaters.<sup>7</sup>

What prevented Black lesbian filmmakers from making longer films that might garner wider audiences and distribution deals was the documentary or autobiographical nature of the films.<sup>8</sup> Van Leer (1997) suggests that “Black lesbian directors have probably even less access to funding and audiences than do African American gay males. Not surprisingly, their work maintains close formal ties to the marketable genres of documentary and autobiography” (174). While these films might have been “marketable” to these specific genres, they often did not reach audiences outside of the Black lesbian and gay community and therefore did not earn enough profit or critical attention to encourage Hollywood studios to fund bigger projects. Based on data as

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7. For a list of films directed by Black lesbian filmmakers during this time, see <http://www.sistersincinema.com/index.html>. Yvonne Welbon created this resource on Black lesbian film that includes information on the length of the films.

8. Documentary films serve an important function in LGBT film history by challenging cultural misrepresentations and correcting historical wrongs. However, the challenge in this is two-fold: “minority voices are expected not only to present their views, but to present them as characteristic of a group—the representation must also be representative” (Van Leer 1997, 165). To be sure, this is why a plethora of representations are necessary to prevent claiming one story as “the truth” about a particular group. Additionally, feature-length films draw the most attention from critics as well as potential for marketing and funding. The attempt to represent the “real” remains a strong impulse in fictional films, and the best way to ensure that those representations get to the big screen are by producing films that can be marketed to wide audiences. For more on Black film and Black documentary film, see Smith 1992.

recent as 2021, women directors make up only 18 percent of the Directors Guild of America, and African Americans only 4.8 percent; while there are no statistics on how many of them are lesbians, only two, Dee Rees, and Angela Robinson, are named on IMDB's "Top LGBT Filmmakers Working Today" list (Dunye is not included).<sup>9</sup> Without access to big budgets for production and marketing that might garner larger audiences, Black lesbian filmmakers and their work have often been relegated to the shadows of the film industry. Mark Reid (1993) suggests that another reason for the problem is racism in the film industry. He states: "Though many white-oriented films encounter studio restrictions, black film projects normally receive extremely low production budgets, narrow race-specific marketing strategies, and limited access to first-run movie theaters" (125). "Black" films are often marketed only to Black audiences in "Black" markets, and while Black consumers make up a huge portion of the moviegoing public, rarely are these films marketed with a crossover viewership in mind.

In recent years, streaming services like Netflix, HBOMax, Disney+, and others have altered the cinematic landscape for consumers, allowing viewers to screen films and television series on demand from the comfort of their homes. However, not much has changed for Black independent and Black queer filmmakers. While it might seem that market forces and the current discourse regarding the lack of queer representation in film and television would lead to a significant increase in this type of content on streaming services, it has not. In early 2021, Netflix, the largest streaming service in the world, released a report that analyzed the diversity of the content on its platform, and while it fared better than Hollywood regarding hiring women and people of color as directors, as well as in relation to the number of Black lead characters in its films and television shows, it did not fare as well regarding LGBTQ content. Only four percent of its lead characters were LGBTQ in film, and only one percent in television series.<sup>10</sup> So, while Netflix is hiring more Black directors and women, this is a keen reminder that although the *platforms* through which filmmakers might distribute their films have changed, the barriers to much-needed resources with which to produce those films have not. In response, Netflix has committed to spending \$100 million to improve diversity on its platform. It remains to be seen how much

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9. See "DGA Diversity-Frequently Asked Questions" <https://www.dga.org/The-Guild/Diversity/Diversity-FAQ.aspx>; and "Top Gay and Lesbian Directors Working Today," <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls051858563/>.

10. See Boorstin 2021.



of that will be allocated to *Black queer* filmmakers who are creating *Black queer* films. Despite these challenges, both Cheryl Dunye and Dee Rees set out to alter the Black queer cinematic landscape with their respective films, *The Watermelon Woman* at the tail end of this so-called golden age of Black queer cinema and *Pariah*, fifteen years later, hoping to usher in a new one.

## Finding Fae

Set in contemporary Philadelphia, *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) is a “mockumentary” that stars Cheryl Dunye, who also wrote and directed the movie. Dunye is an out Black lesbian,<sup>11</sup> and so is the character “Cheryl” she plays in the movie. The film is shot in the style of a documentary, with Cheryl employing direct address throughout. Through the characters of Cheryl, Tamara, and Diana, *The Watermelon Woman* challenges (and at times reinforces) hegemonic and stereotypical representations of Black lesbians in both mainstream and queer cinema. According to Matt Richardson (2011), “Dunye’s project calls attention to the elision, misrecognition, and misrepresentation of black women (and lesbians in particular) in American cinema.” I concur and, by virtue of its fabricated Black lesbian cinema archive, Dunye’s film also reveals the fraught nature of Black queer subjectivity, friendship, community, and belonging.

Cheryl, an aspiring filmmaker, works with her best friend Tamara at a video store, where she learns about and becomes obsessed with the character of the Watermelon Woman (Fae Richards) through the silent film *Plantation Memories*. What Cheryl discovers about Fae delights and astounds her: Fae Richards is “in the family,”<sup>12</sup> a lesbian, and she has appeared in several films, albeit in roles where she played a mammy or servant. Cheryl’s goal, then, is to reclaim Fae from the annals of history and restore the actress to her rightful place in cinematic history.

Another plot weaving through Dunye’s film is Cheryl’s romantic relationship, or lack thereof. Tamara regularly chides Cheryl about being single, and she is constantly trying to set her up with various women. When Cheryl

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11. To distinguish the filmmaker Cheryl Dunye from the character “Cheryl” in the film, I will use “Dunye” when referring to the actual person of Cheryl Dunye, and “Cheryl” when referring to the character she plays in the film.

12. Anecdotally, “family” or “in the family” is coded language in Black communities for gay or lesbian identities.” Dunye, an out Black lesbian, seems to believe that her audience would be familiar with this terminology.



finally does hook up with Diana, a white woman from the video store, her friendship with Tamara is strained. On at least two occasions, she remarks on Cheryl's penchant for dating white women, and she insists that their interest in her friend is rooted in "jungle fever," rather than genuine attraction and desire. Cheryl refuses to believe that Diana fetishizes her Blackness, but after confronting her about it, she learns that Diana *is* "into chocolate:" she has had several Black lovers (including men), and an aunt who was married to a former Black Panther named "Tyrone Jackson." Near the end of the film, Cheryl tells viewers that she and Diana are no longer a couple, offering no explanation regarding the breakup. The film ends with Cheryl revealing to the audience that she has completed her work on *The Watermelon Woman*, and we are treated to a screening of the "film," which is a series of short clips and images of Fae Richards as an actress with a voiceover by Cheryl.

What work is this mockumentary about a Black lesbian filmmaker and her search for a Black lesbian actress doing in American culture? What does *The Watermelon Woman* tell us about Black lesbian experiences, and why does it matter? To start, *The Watermelon Woman* is pure fiction, although the audience might not realize this until Dunye tells us at the end of film. Because of the marginalization and erasure of Black lesbian lives and histories in Black literary and film culture, Dunye felt compelled to create a "history" for Black lesbians in American cinema. In fact, as Robert Reid-Pharr (2006) asserts, "the conceit of Cheryl Dunye's [film] is that the archive of the lived reality of black lesbian women is so scattered and fractured that it becomes necessary for the artist to weave the historical narrative herself" (130). Indeed, Dunye's film situates Fae, albeit a fictional character, in the heart of the Black race film era, and we see images of her alongside those of other actresses and celebrities of the day: Hattie McDaniel, Dorothy Dandridge, and Ella Fitzgerald all make photographic appearances in the movie. While Dunye is not suggesting that any of these women were lesbians, she *is* suggesting that Black lesbian actresses worked and played alongside these more well-known Black stars.<sup>13</sup> Because we have such a limited archive of materials that focuses on Black lesbian lives and histories, Dunye had to create her own. Likewise, most of the film is concerned with excavating Fae's history, and Cheryl faces several challenges in trying to uncover Fae's story: lackadaisical and condescending white librarians and archivists, Black male film collectors who

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13. No doubt some of these stars were lesbian and gay as well. For more detailed discussions of reputed LGBT stage and screen stars from the early and mid-twentieth century, see Davis 1998 and Wilson 2010.

“aren’t into women,” and even a mother who sees her as a “weirdo.” Cheryl’s experiences mirror that of real-life Black lesbians in that our work to uncover our histories is often ridiculed and dismissed even by the lesbian and gay communities that could support us, and it reveals the particular brands of racism and sexism that Black lesbians face from white lesbians, who tend to be the gatekeepers of lesbian archives and history, and Black gay men, who often cannot be bothered with lesbian issues.

Another important aspect of the film is the work that it does to complicate Blackness, lesbianism, and interracial relationships. Tamara criticizes Cheryl for going out with white women and accuses her of “acting like she wants to be white.” In one tense exchange she says:

**Tamara:** I did not invite you out here to talk about your wannabe black girlfriend.

**Cheryl:** Diana doesn’t want to be black. I’m getting into her; can’t you see that?

**Tamara:** All I see is that once again you are going out with a white girl that is acting like she wants to be black and you being a black girl acting like you want to be white. I mean what’s up with you Cheryl, you don’t like the color of your skin nowadays? (Dunye 1996)

Indeed, Tamara’s issues with the relationship are twofold: she feels that Diana fetishizes Blackness, and she suspects that Cheryl is just another pet project for Diana. That is to say, Diana does not care nearly as much about Cheryl the person as she does about Cheryl the “Black” lesbian. Here, Dunye is remarking on the ways in which Black lesbians face oppression based on race from both Black *and* white lesbians; in this case, the ways in which Cheryl’s Black friends judge her taste in white women, particularly the “these white devil types” she continues to date. Tamara remarks to her Black lesbian girlfriend Stacy, “She doesn’t always date white women, but when she does, they’re so ugh!” From Tamara’s perspective, Cheryl cannot distinguish between white women who truly desire her for who she is, and the ones who want to add another Black lesbian notch to their belts. Indeed, Stefanie Dunning (2009) reminds us that “the relationship between Cheryl and Diana arises largely out of Diana’s desire for Cheryl, Diana’s machinations, and Cheryl’s willingness to passively accept Diana as a lover” (104). Dunning is correct; it’s clear that, for a time, Cheryl is completely smitten with Diana, and even allows her to claim ownership of her film, although Diana has nothing to do with its production, other than arranging a terse meeting with a distant relative. While Tamara’s attitudes might seem limiting,

her comments are rooted in the very real racist sexual stereotypes that Black lesbians often faced while dating white women.<sup>14</sup>

The tensions around Cheryl's romantic relationships also evince something else: the precarity of Cheryl's friendship with Tamara. Very early in the film we learn that Cheryl is willing to short Tamara her hard-earned money for the sake of her own filmmaking enterprise. While Tamara is supportive of her friend's aspirations as a filmmaker, she wants to be paid for her work as a videographer. When Tamara asks for the fifty dollars that Cheryl has shortchanged her, Cheryl is dismissive and walks away, even as Tamara continues to insist that she be paid for her labor. Likewise, Tamara's comments about Cheryl's love life, even if coarsely delivered, reveal a level of concern and care that is not always reciprocated. To be sure, after Tamara challenges Cheryl regarding Diana's intentions, as well as other testy exchanges, their friendship becomes even more strained. In time, Cheryl addresses the changing nature of their friendship in the film, but neither woman articulates the underlying causes nor seems to care about their fading friendship. Tamara has only one more scene in the film: Cheryl calls Tamara at the video store to tell her that June, Fae's partner, is in the hospital. Cheryl is devastated, but Tamara is excited about her upcoming trip to the Poconos with Stacy and seems weary of discussing Cheryl's film. Eventually the video store manager interrupts the conversation, effectively ending it, and the audience is left wondering whether the women will resolve their communication issues and repair their friendship or go their separate ways. Reconciliation seems to be within the realm of possibility, as near the end of the film Cheryl says to her audience, "Tamara, girlfriend, let's hope that we can work things out soon."

Additionally, while Dunye does not say much about class directly, there is a cavernous class divide between Diana and Cheryl. Diana lives in a huge loft and "volunteers" with under-resourced Black children. She makes no mention of employment, which suggests that she is independently wealthy. Indeed, her family is "connected" in that she has direct access to Mrs. Paige Fletcher, who lives in a mansion and still employs Black servants. Cheryl, however, must borrow the equipment to make her film, and works two jobs to make ends meet. Tamara's opposition to the relationship, then, is also rooted

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14. There is a long history of Black lesbians experiencing sexual stereotyping by white lesbians. For example, Cynthia Cauthern (1979) bears witness to the ways in which white lesbians often expected Black lesbians to be butch or aggressive and how white women were discussed in relation to their political acumen and activism, but Black women were discussed in regard to their prowess in bed.

in her fears that Diana sees Cheryl as an object, at best a Black body with which to muck about, at worst one to possess, as opposed to seeing Cheryl as an agentive subject in her own right.

In this regard, “whiteness, or interraciality, enables Cheryl to confront significant aspects of black lesbian history, namely one aspect of race oppression experienced by black lesbians” (Dunning 2009, 99). Here, whiteness refers to the material reality of what it means to be a white lesbian (often well-resourced, well-connected, and accepted), in contrast with the experiences of Black lesbians (often under-resourced, underappreciated, and ostracized). Thus, it is through the lens of this fictional relationship that Dunye is able to articulate the complexities of interracial lesbian relationships. It is no secret that interracial relationships existed in lesbian communities, but what might not be so widely known are the ways in which power and race mitigate relationships between supposedly “liberal” women. Diana tells Cheryl that her family has a history of “liberal hippie” activity and sexual relationships with Black people, as if having sex with Black people absolves them from this country’s legacy of white supremacy. Additionally, when Diana and Cheryl visit Mrs. Paige Fletcher, Diana remains silent when the woman berates Cheryl, Black people, and lesbians in general. By not speaking up for Cheryl, we can infer that her “love” of Black people only extends to their bodies and the bedroom, not when they are confronted with racism or homophobia.

Related to that are the ways in which white feminists and cultural critics fetishize Black people in their work. Camille Paglia has a cameo in the movie, and when Cheryl interviews her, she waxes poetic about the image of the Watermelon Woman as a “goddess of abundance” and remarks that she does not understand why Black feminist critics cannot embrace this figure that reminds Paglia of her Italian grandmother. Paglia is shocked that Paige and Richards were lovers and does not believe that they were involved in an interracial relationship. Additionally, when Cheryl asks a group of white feminist students if they were familiar with *The Watermelon Woman*, they admit to recognizing Martha Paige but not the Black woman. They state, “[i]f she’s in anything after the 1960s, don’t ask us, we haven’t covered women and blaxploitation yet.” Here, Dunye is making two observations: One, that while Paglia’s scene is satire, it is speaking to the ways in which “heterosexism and racism often underlie the romanticization of the celebrated white creators of popular culture’s representations” (Sullivan 2000, 459). Paglia’s statements are also a comment on epistemology and popular culture, alleging that white feminist scholars are better equipped to understand the experiences of Black

women than Black women themselves. Comparing the Watermelon Woman to her Italian grandmother erases the specific ways in which race obtains for Black women in that their domestic labor was denigrated rather than celebrated. Two, the white lesbian students' remarks speak to the ways in which women's studies curricula still struggle to adequately represent Black women's lives and experiences in their classes. Black women are seen as something to "get to" and "get past" rather than as a valid field of academic inquiry.

Finally, the film works to complicate the notion that Black lesbians are always at odds with "the Black community." Cheryl and Tamara are clearly part of a Black (and lesbian and gay) community in Philadelphia. We see them going to clubs and engaging with friends and family, and most importantly, they are "out" lesbians. Still, their relationship with their community is fraught: Cheryl's mother, while supportive and helpful, calls her a "weirdo" and remarks that Cheryl would have liked hanging out with the weirdos (gays and lesbians) at the clubs where Fae used to perform. Furthermore, Cheryl is harassed by the police. The officers label her a boy and a crackhead, accusing her of stealing her camera and equipment. Although they finally let her go, she is shaken by this incident. Cheryl is both misgendered and stereotyped based on her appearance—short hair, T-shirt and overalls—and because she is hanging around an abandoned building, she is marked as a criminal. We are reminded that Blackness, while celebrated in some contexts (for example, at the Sistah Sound poetry reading in the film), often becomes a site for violence and harassment. Nonetheless, Cheryl survives the incident, going on to tell Fae's story while she is yet telling her own. Throughout the film's narrative, Dunye calls attention to the fact that she is a *Black* lesbian and that while her identity is always fraught, the creation of this mockumentary has allowed her to publicly proclaim her identity as a Black lesbian filmmaker and to connect to a Black lesbian past.

## **I am a Lesbian!**

Dee Rees's 2011 film *Pariah* also challenges and complicates dominant cultural representations of Black lesbians, even as it reinforces stereotypes about Black mothers. The film opened to good reviews and earned a standing ovation at its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival. Much like *The Watermelon Woman* and other films directed by Black women mentioned previously, *Pariah* was marketed as a Black film, and although it did reach mainstream LGBT audiences, the film was a modest success at the box office, opening on only four

screens and earning less than \$50,000 opening weekend.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of its meager box office earnings, *Pariah* is an important film that provides an opportunity to examine the vagaries of creating a Black lesbian coming-of-age story. Primarily through the character of Alike, Rees examines the fraught nature of community, family, and sexual identity, particularly as it relates to belonging, desire, and authenticity.

*Pariah* is a film about a Black family in crisis. *Pariah*'s main character is Alike, a Black teenager who has already figured out that she is a lesbian. Her parents' marriage is failing, mainly due to the father's infidelities and the mother's rigid, ultra-conservative faith. Similar to Dunye's character Cheryl, Alike is an aspiring artist, a poet, and the audience becomes privy to how she eventually uses poetry to escape her tumultuous home life. Alike is also struggling with her gender presentation; while there is no doubt that she is lesbian, she is still trying to negotiate what that means in terms of her sexual identity. In this, she is aided by her best friend, Laura. Laura is similar to Dunye's character Tamara, as she provides another lens through which to view Black lesbian subjectivity and community. However, Rees's portrayal of queer friendship is less fraught with communication problems, although the young women traverse contrasting class positions. Laura's family is poor, while Alike's is middle-class, and Laura and her sister struggle to make ends meet. In one scene, Laura and her sister are at the kitchen table, which is covered with bills, and Laura is eating out of a Styrofoam bowl filled with ramen for dinner. Her sister Candace has been soaking her feet, indicative of a day spent standing at work. Candace is chiding Laura for not studying for her GED and using flashcards to help her study vocabulary, but Laura is more interested in how they are going to pay the monthly bills.

**Laura:** Anyway, how much we paid him last time?

**Candace:** Six twenty-five.

**Laura:** So that's another two seventy-five for the rest of the month. Electric?

**Candace:** Half.

**Laura:** Phone?

**Candace:** Let it ride.

**Laura:** Gas?

**Candace:** How much is it?

**Laura:** Eighty-five.

**Candace:** Half. (Rees 2011)

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15. According to *The Numbers*, *Pariah* earned \$48,579 its opening weekend. To date, its gross domestic earnings are \$769,552. Retrieved from [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Pariah-\(2011\)#tab=summary](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Pariah-(2011)#tab=summary), accessed September 9, 2021.

Their financial situation is precarious, as indicated by their inability to pay all their bills in full, but Candace insists that Laura work less and study more so that she can earn a GED and perhaps improve her employment situation. It should come as no surprise that Laura is struggling financially. According to the Williams Institute (2019), “30.8% of Black LGBT people live in poverty” (3). No doubt the precarity of Laura’s finances is exacerbated by her lack of education, which limits where she might be gainfully employed. However, the class divide between Alike and Laura has little bearing on their friendship. Lisa Henderson (2015) reminds us that “[f]riendship is sustenance in queer life; it reorgani[z]es class and queer boundaries (even where, on other occasions, it entrenches them), it mixes class within queer communities, and it offers imperfect solidarities in states of crisis” (35). To be sure, Laura is the only person with whom Alike can be her authentic self, and this friendship is key to Alike’s process of self-discovery and self-definition. Not only does Laura accept Alike as a lesbian, but she also helps Alike navigate her burgeoning sexual identity by taking her to lesbian clubs, trying to set her up with girls, and showing her how to dress. Laura may be financially strapped, but she has an abundance of care and concern for her friend.

Throughout the film, we are privy to how Alike choreographs her own notion of a Black lesbian identity: she is at once stud and femme, masculine and feminine, even going so far as to borrow Laura’s strap-on penis to wear to the local lesbian club in an attempt to be more masculine. Alike finds the strap-on uncomfortable and ends up throwing it in a trash can outside her house. Furthermore, the straight girls at school tell her that she isn’t “hard enough.” In fact, one calls out loud enough for Alike to hear, “I like girls. But I LOVE boys.” Here, Rees moves away from merely recreating stereotypical representations of masculine women seeking out straight girls—the lesbian predator trope often seen in mainstream films—by revealing that straight women also impose gender roles on nonheteronormative women. In other words, heteronormative women often expect lesbians to be masculine-presenting in their attire, as well as to assume a more stereotypical masculine role (i.e., initiating conversation, making the first move), the same behaviors they expect from heteronormative men. In this way, Rees allows us a glimpse into the pressures that lesbians face as to how to be accepted as “authentic” lesbians. In Alike’s microcosm of young Black lesbian life in Brooklyn, she initially feels that she must become more masculine to be accepted by the girls she wants to date. Eventually, Alike



presents as a gender-blender, or a lesbian who combines a mix of masculine and feminine gender traits,<sup>16</sup> rejecting the stereotype that all Black lesbians must be either butch or masculine. While Dunye's film focuses more on inter- and intraracial relationship dynamics than gender presentation (how one's bodily comportment, mode of dress, and other style choices do or do not adhere to gendered norms), we can glean that Cheryl presents as a mix of masculine and feminine, often wearing lipstick and earrings with her jean shorts and button-down shirts.

Although figuring out how to present as lesbian is an important aspect of the film—in other words, how one reveals their lesbian identity to lesbian communities through clothing, bodily comportment, language, attitude, etc.—more important is the fact that Alike must present as feminine/straight at home, because her mother Audrey refuses to accept anything else. One of the most painful scenes in the movie comes very early in the film. Alike is alone on the subway, and she slowly strips off any item of clothing that might mark her as masculine: the baseball cap and scarf that covers her natural hair, the oversized shirt, and the chain, which are all markers of contemporary urban masculinity. Before arriving home, she also puts on hoop earrings and fluffs out her hair, and we see that she has been wearing a bright pink t-shirt under her other clothes. Eric Darnell Pritchard (2017) shows us how *Pariah*—mostly through the character of Alike—is “an example of how characters engage with sartorial politics on their own terms as a mode of survival, self-making, and an implicit critique of those systems and structures” (137). Here, Alike's sartorial politics refer to the ways in which she navigates her burgeoning lesbian identity through her manner of dress, as well as how she makes sartorial choices that attend to her safety at home. Indeed, we see how Alike transforms from a masculine lesbian to a seemingly straight femme and back again every morning when she gets to school, not because she is playing with gender presentation, but to appease her homophobic mother, who stands in as a symbol of unwavering cis-heteronormativity. Gender presentation might be fluid as well as performative, but it is also a necessary survival strategy for a young Black lesbian who cannot be herself at home. This is no mere conflation of gender and sexual orientation but a manifestation of the fear of violence that Black lesbians face when they do

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16. See Mignon R. Moore, “Lipstick or Timberlands: Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (2006): 114–39.

not conform to heteronormative gender roles or styles of dress.<sup>17</sup> What is at stake here is the material reality of what it means to identify as lesbian, as well as what it means to *look* like one. In Alike's case, this is evidenced by her frequent battles with Audrey over what she should wear, even to church. Audrey continues to buy frilly clothes for Alike, even though she refuses to wear them. She also "accuses" Alike of looking like a boy, coded language for looking like a lesbian. Mignon R. Moore (2011) calls this more masculine gender presentation *transgressive* and suggests that "the masculinity portrayed by Black women is particularly feared in society and tends to be associated with violence, so transgressive women become problematized and feared by others because of the masculinity they portray" (87). In the film, these transgressive gender displays are associated with lesbianism, which may explain why Laura's mother has rejected her, and they are in part why Alike's mother insists that she wear more feminine clothing. Though torturous, (one can see the pain on her face), changing her clothes on the bus occasions a modicum of peace for Alike, one less argument with her mother, whom she loves and still wants to please; and one less snarky remark from her little sister, who also knows her secret. While beyond the scope of this paper, Alike's transition in and out of heteronormative sartorial choices (modes of dress that align with societal norms regarding gender and clothing) also speaks to the invisibility of femme lesbians, who are often read as straight based on their heteronormative gender presentations.

Alike's relationship with her father Arthur is less strained; in fact, she is what we might call a "daddy's girl." They spend a lot of time together, playing basketball, running errands, and she usually turns to him for advice. Alike assumes that her father knows she is lesbian, even though they have never discussed it. Still, he cautions her to stay away from "that element." Arthur, a police detective, recently helped to bust a drug ring where there is a new "special night for ladies" at a club on Friday nights. However, the dangerous element he is referring to isn't the drug dealers, but the women who frequent

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17. I am not suggesting that all Black lesbians experience this type of violence. However, the murder of young Black lesbian Sakia Gunn in 2003, by a man whose advances she rebuffed, lends credence to the notion that this type of violence did and still does occur to Black lesbians. See *Dreams Deferred: The Sakia Gunn Film Project* at <http://www.twm.org/catalog/pages/cpage.aspx?rec=1193>. Similarly, poet and activist Amiri Baraka's daughter, Shani Baraka, and her partner, Rayshon Holmes, were also murdered in 2003; more recently, Britney Cosby and her girlfriend Crystal Jackson were killed by Britney's father, James Cosby, Jr., allegedly because they were lesbians (see Moore 2014).

the club. Similar to the ways in which Cheryl was criminalized by the police in Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*, Alike's father is making assumptions about the criminality of the lesbians who frequent the nightclubs in *Pariah*. Painfully ironic, though, is the fact that the dangerous element isn't the club that the lesbians frequent but Arthur's own friend, Sock. Sock is particularly nasty to the Black lesbian women who come to the store near the club. In an especially vile exchange, he says to the young woman who walks in the store:

**Sock:** Excuse me, miss. Miss! Or should I say sir? Sir. Sir! You hear me talking to you?

**Arthur:** Chill out, Sock.

**Sock:** Sir, I been trying to get your attention. Do you go by sir or miss? I just got a simple question I wanted to ask: See, I just wanna know, how does pussy taste? I just want to know if you go with women for the taste, or is it because you too dry, crusty, and ugly, so don't no man want you. (laughs)

**Young woman (who has been silent up until now says):** I can't lie. The pussy do taste good. You should try it sometime. Or better yet, ask your wife how much she like me.

**Sock:** Fucking bulldagger! He/she dyke!

**Arthur:** (laughing) Ask your wife! She told you!

**Sock:** She ain't tell me nothing. What y'all niggas laughing at? I thought you was my friend, Mack? But I guess I didn't expect you to defend me Free, with the way your daughter walking 'round here bullying. (Rees 2011)

Arthur jumps up and Mack (another friend) keeps the men from coming to blows. The young woman experiences what Moya Bailey (2021) has coined *misogynoir*, or “the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (1). To be sure, the unnamed woman is read as a lesbian because of her sartorial choices. She is in a knit wool cap, jeans, and vest, and the audience cannot see her hair. She could pass for a man, as evidenced by Sock's homophobic and transphobic slur “he/she” and his questioning of her gender based on nothing more than what she is wearing. Again, Rees drives the point home: gender presentation is a salient aspect of Black lesbian subjectivity, because lesbians often face very real violence from both within and outside of their homes based solely on a refusal to conform to heteronormative gender presentations, including clothing, hair, and makeup.

Relatedly, I extend *misogynoir* to include sexual orientation when Alike endures a violent attack from her mother when she realizes that her

speculations about Alike's sexuality are true. During the confrontation, Audrey calls her a "nasty-ass, stinking-ass dyke." Arthur implores Alike to "Tell your mother it's not true," but Alike looks at him for help, shouting "I thought you knew!" Her father, who had once been her protector, her coconspirator, is useless in this fight. She then declares to them both, "I am a lesbian; I am a dyke!" Audrey slaps her and knocks her to the floor, where she continues to beat her. Arthur eventually pulls his wife off of his daughter, but he leaves the house, oblivious to the chaos he has helped to create because of his refusal to *see* his daughter for who she is: a young Black lesbian. This scene is important for several reasons. Alike is finally able to share her truth with her mother even though she is violently attacked, and their relationship is irreparably broken. She understands that her mother will never accept her as a lesbian, regardless of how she dresses. Jennifer DeClue (2018) argues that this characterization of Audrey is an attempt to universalize the film through "a recognizable icon . . . the trope of the unloving, overbearing black mother, reminiscent of the kind of black woman portrayed in the *Moynihan Report*, albeit with a homophobic twist" (240). Although I am not sure that this trope works to universalize Alike's story to attract a wider audience—as mentioned earlier, the film only opened on four screens—there is no doubt that Audrey's character, and Laura's unnamed mother, are used to remind audiences that natal families are not always safe spaces for queer Black children and young adults.

Additionally, we learn that *both* of Alike's parents have been in denial. Audrey's violent outburst is not because she *learns* that Alike is a lesbian, but because she has *confirmed* it. Alike's insistence on wearing masculine clothing, her refusal to go to the prom, and her hanging around with "that element" (including her openly lesbian friend Laura) all pointed to Alike's Black lesbian subjectivity, although both Arthur and his wife chose to ignore it. Arthur, perhaps hiding his own secrets, refuses to engage Alike in a conversation about her sexuality, although they seem able to talk about most other issues. When he warns her about the criminal element at the pier, he misses an opportunity to ask his daughter about her interest in the club, perhaps because he doesn't want to know. Finally, although neither sartorial choices nor queer friendship networks are indicators or predictors of sexual identity, they are important aspects of Black lesbian subjectivity. Black lesbians, and other queer folk, often use coded language, transgressive modes of dress, as well as other identity markers to signal themselves to each other to build community. It should come as no surprise that nonqueer folk can read the signs as well.

Alike does not suffer police harassment like Cheryl, nor does her mother consider her weird. Instead, she carries the physical and emotional scars from the violence that she suffers at the hands of her family, and her mother views both Alike and her friend Laura as abominations. When finally presented with an option, Alike chooses herself. I am not suggesting that she has chosen to be a lesbian; in fact, I contend that she has always known her sexual orientation. What I am suggesting is that she has chosen to live her life openly as a lesbian, despite being rejected by her mother and portions of her own community. Alike recognizes that to survive, she must leave the toxic environment that threatens to engulf her.

## Finis

Cheryl Dunye and Dee Rees are two Black lesbian filmmakers invested in portraying the material reality of Black lesbian lives. While *The Watermelon Woman* and *Pariah* are fundamentally very different films, they share several similarities. The main characters in both films rely on queer friendship to help the women navigate their identities and queer community networks. Alike is mentored by her older, seemingly wiser friend Laura, and Cheryl is constantly “checked” by her friend Tamara. Similarly, both women face discrimination from inside Black communities: Cheryl in the form of that same friend Tamara, who judges her for dating white women, and Alike from her mother, her father’s friends, and even the queer girl with whom she has her first sexual encounter. Interestingly, both films create subtle commentary around class, highlighting the ways in which poor Black and queer people of color are criminalized, for example, when Cheryl is accosted by the police because they think she has stolen a camera; the kids at the pier (some of whom we can infer might be homeless), to whom Arthur refers to as a “bad element;” as well as the stark differences in privilege and class between Cheryl and her white lover. At the same time, Rees’s film offers another way of thinking about class solidarity and queer friendship. Alike’s class-adjacent friend and first lover rejects her, but Laura, who is barely making ends meet, provides the safety and security of friendship that Alike needs to grow into herself. Finally, both films are invested in characters using art as a means to self-actualization: Cheryl through her use of documentary film to create a Black lesbian past, and Alike, who uses poetry as an outlet for her feelings about her burgeoning lesbian identity. Most importantly, both films end in triumph, with happy endings that many queer characters are not allowed to experience in mainstream films.

Cheryl Dunye went searching for a Black lesbian cinematic foremother and instead claimed a piece of history for herself. Her film was remastered and rereleased in 2016, speaking to the power of its cultural influence, as well as to the dearth of Black lesbian feature films. Still, Dunye's film was a cautionary tale. It would be another fifteen years before another full-length feature film by a Black lesbian with a Black lesbian protagonist made it to the big screen. And while *Pariah* also basked in the glory of rave reviews, Dee Rees's modest box-office success should be a wake-up call. Even though contemporary LGBTQ culture claims to be more inclusive and welcoming, it is still largely represented by white middle-and-upper class gays and lesbians. According to Beandrea July (2021), in the eleven years since *Pariah* debuted, "not a single feature focused on Black lesbians has made it through mainstream pipelines." Major motion picture cinematic representations of Black queer subjectivities, particularly those centering Black lesbians, are as elusive as unicorns and beg the question: How do Black queer filmmakers get more buy-in from major studios and moviegoing audiences? Without more funding and distribution and bigger box office receipts, fewer films like *Pariah* and *The Watermelon Woman* will be made. While commercial success should not have any bearing on a film's worthiness, we know that ticket sales do and will continue to matter. Regardless, *Pariah* and *The Watermelon Woman* are keen reminders that Black and queer films are not mutually exclusive; Blackness and queerness coexist. Each film works to expand the archive of Black lesbian major motion picture representations, foregrounding the material reality of Black lesbian experiences and amplifying the power and necessity of Black lesbian storytelling and filmmaking.

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